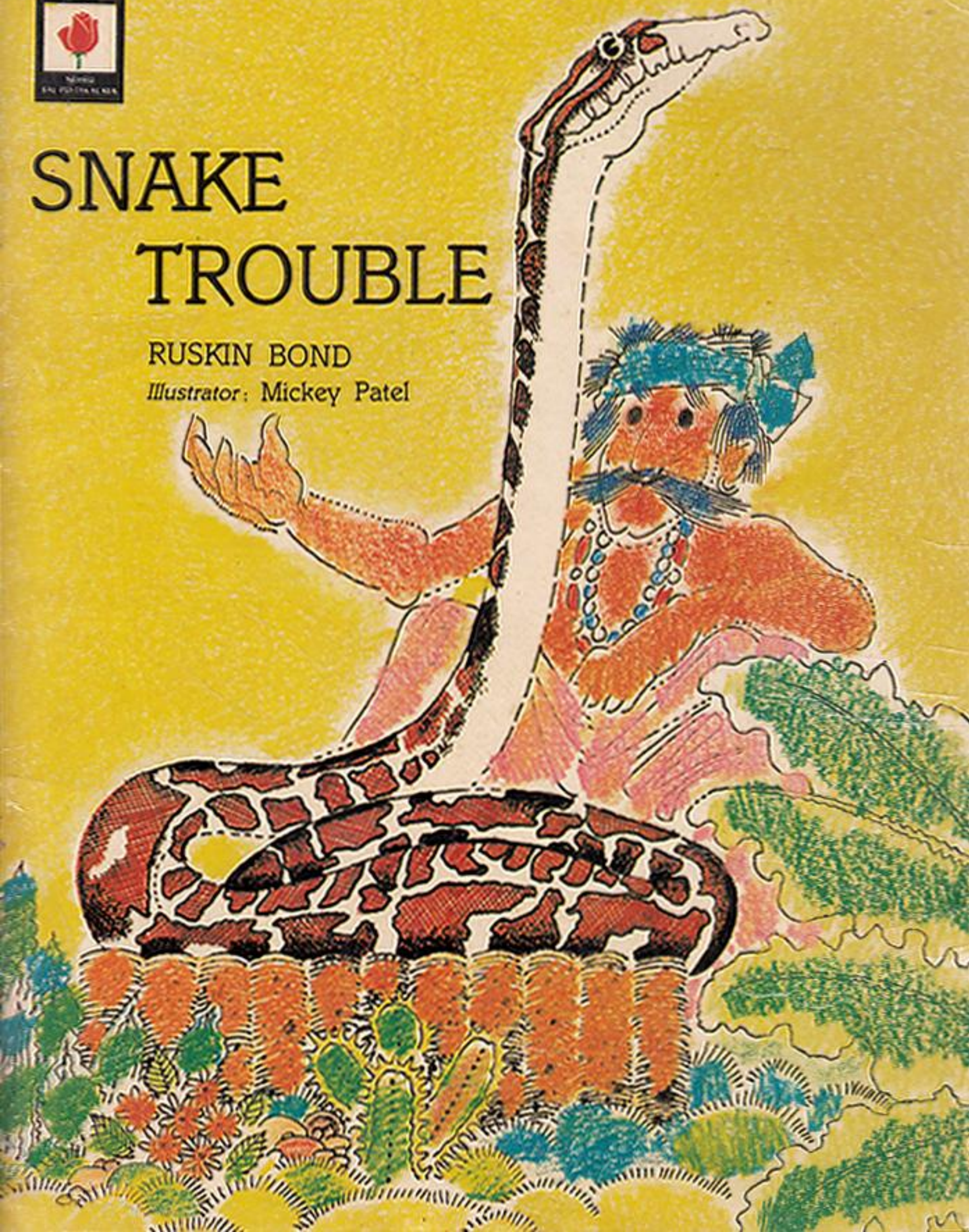




SNAKE TROUBLE

RUSKIN BOND

Illustrator: Mickey Patel



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SNAKE TROUBLE

After retiring from the Indian Railways and settling in Dehra, Grandfather often enlivened his days (and ours) by keeping unusual pets. He paid a snake-charmer in the bazaar twenty rupees for a young python. Then, to the delight of a curious group of boys and girls, he slung the python over his shoulder and brought it home.

I was with Grandfather at the time, and felt very proud walking beside him. He was popular in Dehra, especially among the more humble people, and everyone greeted him respectfully without seeming to notice the python. They were, in fact, quite used to seeing him in the company of strange creatures.

The first to see us arrive was Toto the monkey, who was swinging from a branch of the jack-fruit tree. One look at the python, ancient enemy of his race, and he fled into the house squealing with fright. Then our parrot, Popeye, who had his perch in the verandah, set up the most awful shrieking and whistling. His whistle was like that of a steam-engine. He had learnt to do this in earlier days, when we had lived near railway stations.

The noise brought Grandmother to the verandah, where she nearly fainted at the sight of the python curled round Grandfather's neck.

Grandmother was tolerant of most of his pets, but she drew the line at reptiles. Even a sweet-tempered lizard made her blood run cold. There was little chance that she

would allow a python in the house.

"It will strangle you to death!" she cried.

"Nonsense," said Grandfather. "He's only a young fellow."

"He'll soon get used to us," I added, by way of support.

"He might, indeed," said Grandmother, "but I have no intention of getting used to him. And your Aunt Ruby is coming to stay with us tomorrow. She'll leave the minute she knows there's a snake in the house."

"Well, perhaps we should show it to her first thing," said Grandfather, who found Aunt Ruby rather tiresome.

"Get rid of it right away," said Grandmother.

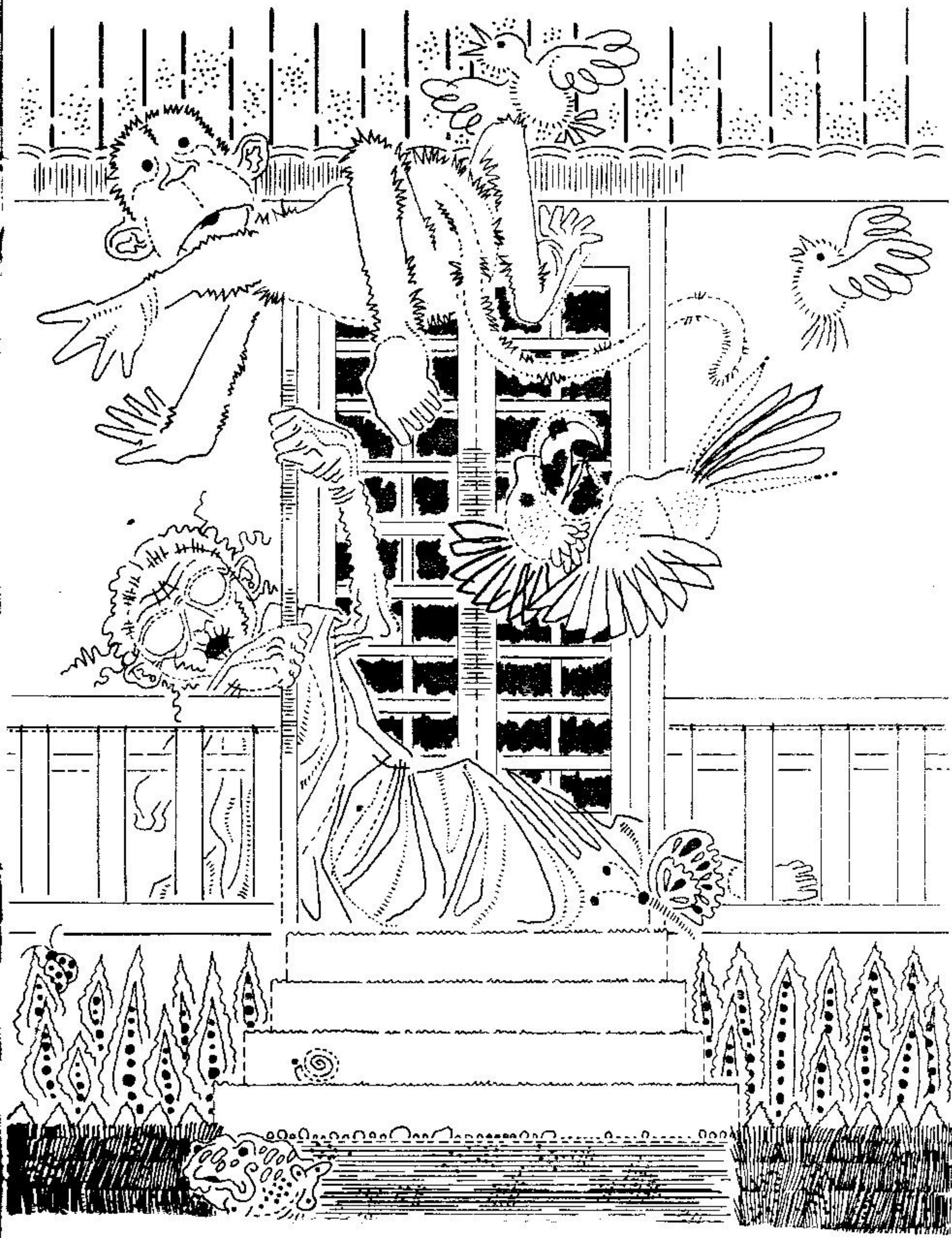
"I can't let it loose in the garden. It might find its way into the chicken shed, and then where will we be!"

"Minus a few chickens," I said reasonably, but this only made Grandmother more determined to banish the python.

"Lock that awful thing in the bathroom," she said. "Go and find the man you bought it from, give him twenty rupees or twice as much, and get him to come here and collect it! He can keep the money you gave him."

Grandfather and I took the snake into the bathroom and placed it in an empty tub. Looking a bit crestfallen, he said, "Perhaps your Grandmother is right. I'm not





worried about Aunt Ruby, but we don't want the python to get hold of Toto or Popeye."

We hurried off to the bazaar in search of the snake-charmer but hadn't gone far when we found several snake-charmers looking for us. They had heard that Grandfather was buying snakes, and they had brought with them snakes of various sizes and descriptions.



"No, no!" protested Grandfather. "We don't want more snakes. We want to return the one we bought."

But the man who had sold it to us had, apparently, returned to his village in the jungle, looking for another python for Grandfather; and the other snake-charmers were not interested in buying, only in selling. In order to shake them off, we had to return home by a roundabout route, climbing a wall and cutting through an orchard. We found Grandmother pacing up and down the verandah. One look at our faces and she knew we had failed in our mission.



"All right," said Grandmother. "Just take it away yourselves and see that it doesn't come back."

"We'll get rid of it, Granny," I said confidently. "Don't you worry."

Grandfather opened the bathroom door and stepped into the room. I was close behind him. We couldn't see the python anywhere.

"He's gone," announced Grandfather.

"We left the window open," I said.

"Deliberately, no doubt," said Grandmother. "But it couldn't have gone far. You'll have to search the grounds."

A careful search was made of the house, the roof, the kitchen, the garden and the chicken shed, but there was no sign of the python.

"He must have gone over the garden wall," Grandfather said cheerfully. "He'll be well away by now!"

The python did not reappear, and when Aunt Ruby arrived with enough luggage to indicate that she had come for a long visit, there was only the parrot to greet her with a series of long, ear-splitting whistles.

For a couple of days Grandfather and I were a little worried that the python might make a sudden reappearance, but when he didn't show up again we felt he had gone for good. Aunt Ruby had to put up with Toto the monkey making faces at her, something I did only when she wasn't looking; and she complained that Popeye shrieked loudest when she was in the room; but she was used to them, and knew she would have to put up with them if she was going to stay with us.



And then, one evening, we were startled by a scream from the garden.

Seconds later Aunt Ruby came flying up the verandah steps, gasping, "In the guava tree. I was reaching for a guava when I saw it staring at me. The look in its eyes! As though it would eat me alive—"

"Calm down, dear," urged Grandmother, sprinkling rose-water over my aunt. "Tell us, what did you see?"

"A snake!" sobbed Aunt Ruby. "A great boa-

constrictor in the guava tree. Its eyes were terrible, and it looked at me in such a queer way."

"Trying to tempt you with a guava, no doubt!" said Grandfather, turning away to hide his smile. He gave me a meaningful look, and I hurried out into the garden. But when I got to the guava tree, the python (if it had been the python) had gone.

"Aunt Ruby must have frightened it off," I told Grandfather.

"I'm not surprised," he said. "But it will be back. I think it's taken a fancy to your aunt."

Sure enough, the python began to make brief but frequent appearances, usually turning up in the most unexpected places.

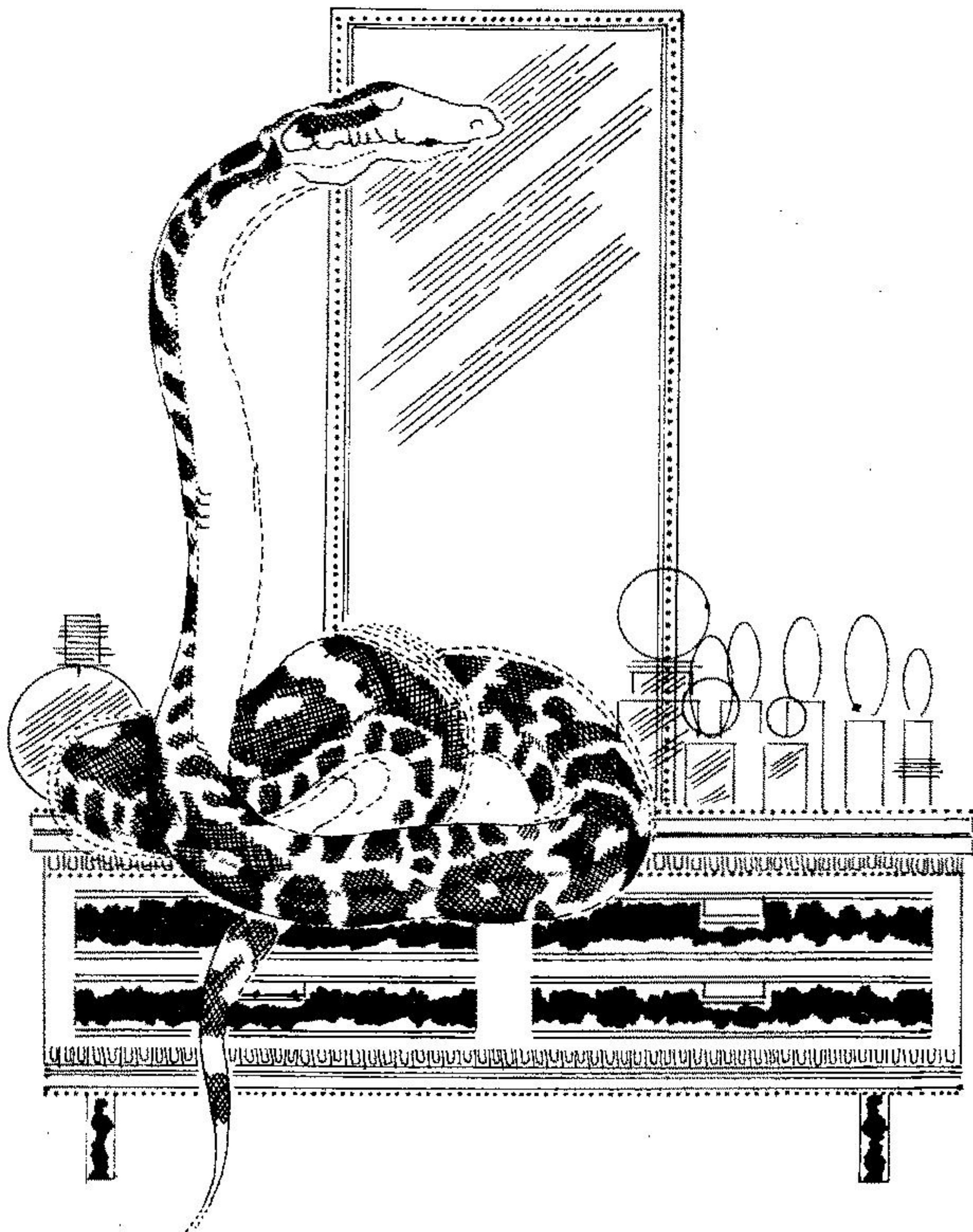
One morning I found him curled up on a dressing-table, gazing at his own reflection in the mirror. I went for Grandfather, but by the time we returned the python had moved on.

He was seen again in the garden, and one day I spotted him climbing the iron ladder to the roof. I set off after him, and was soon up the ladder, which I had ascended many times. I stood up on the flat roof just in time to see the snake disappearing down a drainpipe. The end of his tail was visible for a few moments and then that too disappeared.

"I think he lives in the drainpipe," I told Grandfather.

"Where does he get his food?" asked Grandmother.

"Probably lives on those field rats that used to be such a nuisance. Remember, they used to live in the drainpipe too."



"Hmm. . ." Grandmother looked thoughtful. "A snake has its uses. Well, as long as he keeps to the roof and prefers rats to chickens. . ."

But the python did not confine himself to the roof. Piercing shrieks from Aunt Ruby had us all rushing to her room. There was the python on her dressing-table, apparently admiring himself in the mirror.

"All the attention he's been getting has probably made him conceited," said Grandfather picking up the python to the accompaniment of further shrieks from Aunt Ruby. "Would you like to hold him for a minute, Ruby? He seems to have taken a fancy to you."

Aunt Ruby ran from the room and on to the verandah, where she was greeted with whistles of derision from Popeye the parrot. Poor Aunt Ruby, she cut short her stay by a week and returned to Lucknow, where she was a schoolteacher. She said she felt safer in her school than she did in our house.

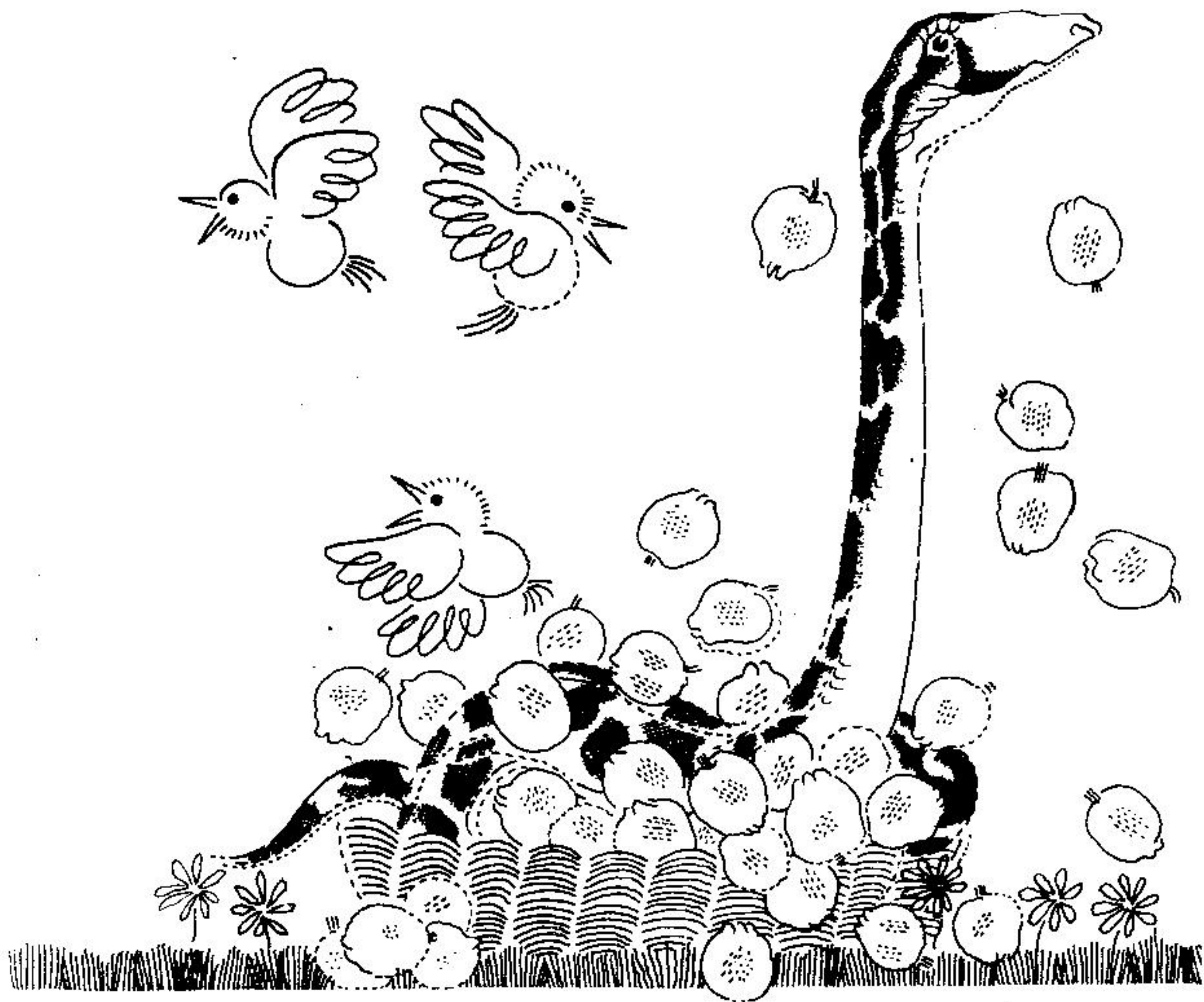
Having seen Grandfather handle the python with such ease and confidence, I decided I would do likewise. So the next time I saw the snake climbing the ladder to the roof, I climbed up alongside him. He stopped in his ascent, and I stopped too. I put out my hand, and he slid over my arm and up to my shoulder. As I did not want him coiling round my neck, I gripped him with both hands and carried him down to the garden. He didn't seem to mind.

The snake felt rather cold and slippery and at first he gave me goose pimples. But I soon got used to him, and he must have liked the way I handled him, because

when I set him down he wanted to climb up my leg. As I had other things to do, I dropped him in a large, empty basket that had been left out in the garden. He stared out at me with unblinking, expressionless eyes. There was no way of knowing what he was thinking, if indeed he thought at all.

I went off for a bicycle ride, and when I returned I found Grandmother picking guavas and dropping them





into the basket. The python must have gone elsewhere.

When the basket was full, Grandmother said, "Will you take these over to Major Malik? It's his birthday and I want to give him a nice surprise."

I placed the basket on the carrier of my cycle and pedalled off to Major Malik's house at the end of the road. The Major met me on the steps of his house.

"And what has your kind Granny sent me today,



young fellow!" he asked.

"A surprise for your Happy Birthday, sir," I said, and put the basket down in front of him.

The python, who had been buried beneath all the guavas, chose this moment to wake up and stand erect to a height of several feet. Guavas tumbled all over the place. The Major uttered an oath and dashed indoors.

I pushed the python back into the basket, picked up

the basket, mounted the bicycle, and rode out of the gate in record time. And it was as well that I did so, because Major Malik came charging out of the house armed with a double-barrelled shot-gun, which he was waving all over the place.

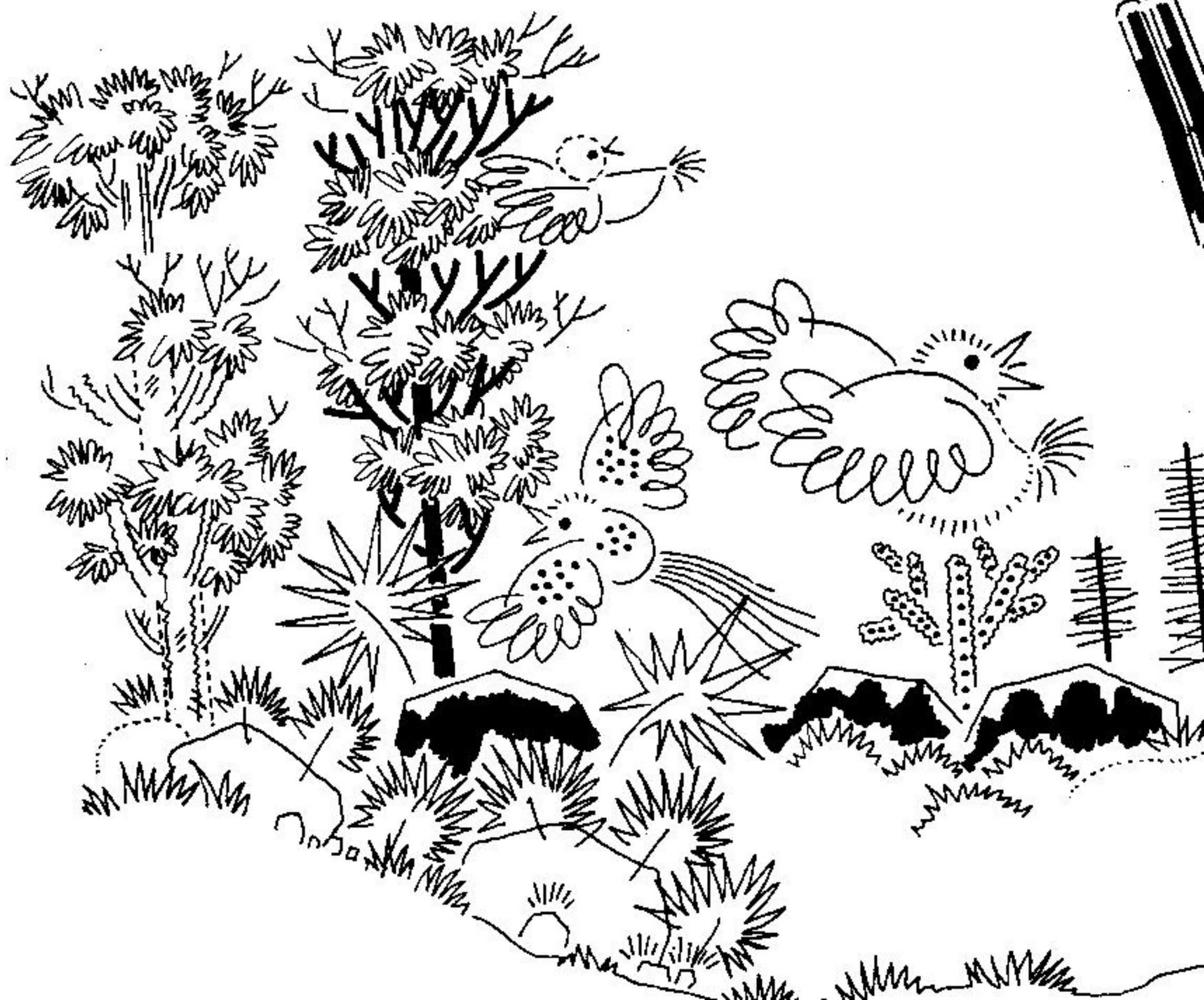
"Did you deliver the guavas?" asked Grandmother when I got back.

"I delivered them," I said truthfully.

"And was he pleased?"

"He's going to write and thank you," I said.

And he did:



"Thank you for the lovely surprise. Obviously you could not have known that my doctor had advised against undue excitement. My blood pressure has been rather high. The sight of your grandson does not improve it. All the same, it's the thought that matters and I take it all in good humour. . ."

"What a strange letter," said Grandmother. "He must be ill, poor man. Are guavas bad for blood pressure?"

"Not by themselves, they aren't," said Grandfather, who had an inkling of what had happened. "But in combination with other things they can be a bit upsetting."



Just when all of us, including Grandmother, were getting used to having the python about the house and



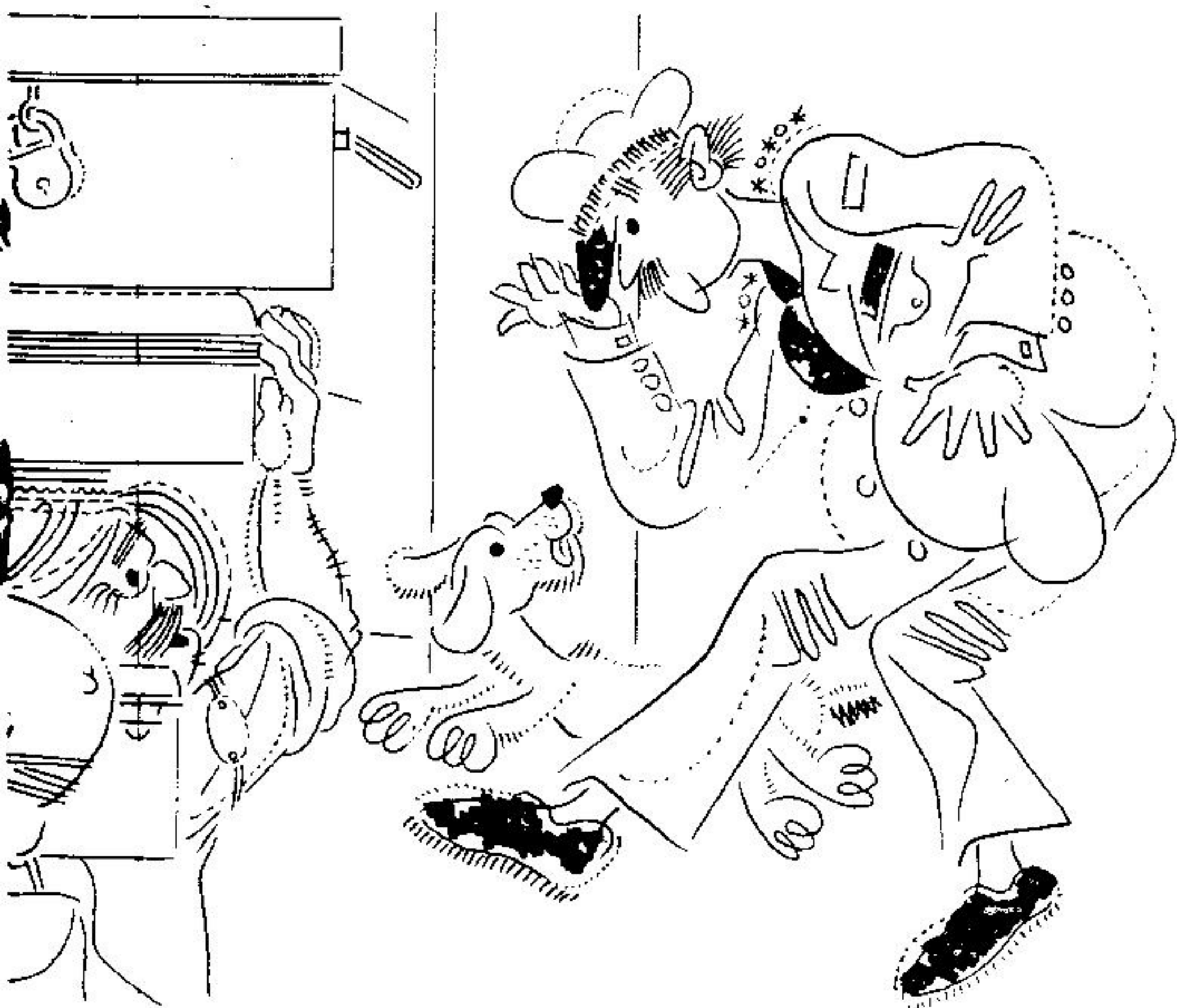
grounds, it was decided that we would be going to Lucknow for a few months.

Lucknow is a large city, about three hundred miles from Dehra. Aunt Ruby lived and worked there. We would be staying with her, and so of course we couldn't take any pythons, monkeys or other unusual pets with us.

"What about Popeye?" I asked.

"Popeye isn't a pet," said Grandmother. "He's one of us. He comes too."

And so the Dehra railway platform was thrown into confusion by the shrieks and whistles of our parrot, who could imitate both the guard's whistle and the whistle of a train. People dashed into their compartments, thinking



the train was about to leave, only to realise that the guard hadn't blown his whistle after all. When they got down, Popeye would let out another shrill whistle, which sent everyone rushing for the train again. This happened several times until the guard actually blew his whistle. Nobody bothered to get on, and several passengers were left behind.

"Can't you gag that parrot?" asked Grandfather, as the train moved out of the station and picked up speed.

"I'll do nothing of the sort," said Grandmother. "I've bought a ticket for him, and he's entitled to enjoy the journey as much as anyone."

Whenever we stopped at a station, Popeye objected to vendors and other people poking their heads in at the windows. Before the journey was over, he had nipped two fingers and a nose and tweaked a ticket-inspector's ear.

It was to be a night journey, and presently Grandmother covered herself with a blanket and stretched herself out on the berth. "It's been a tiring day. I think I'll go to sleep," she said.

"Aren't we going to eat anything?" I asked.

"I'm not hungry—I had something before we left the house. You two help yourselves from the picnic hamper."

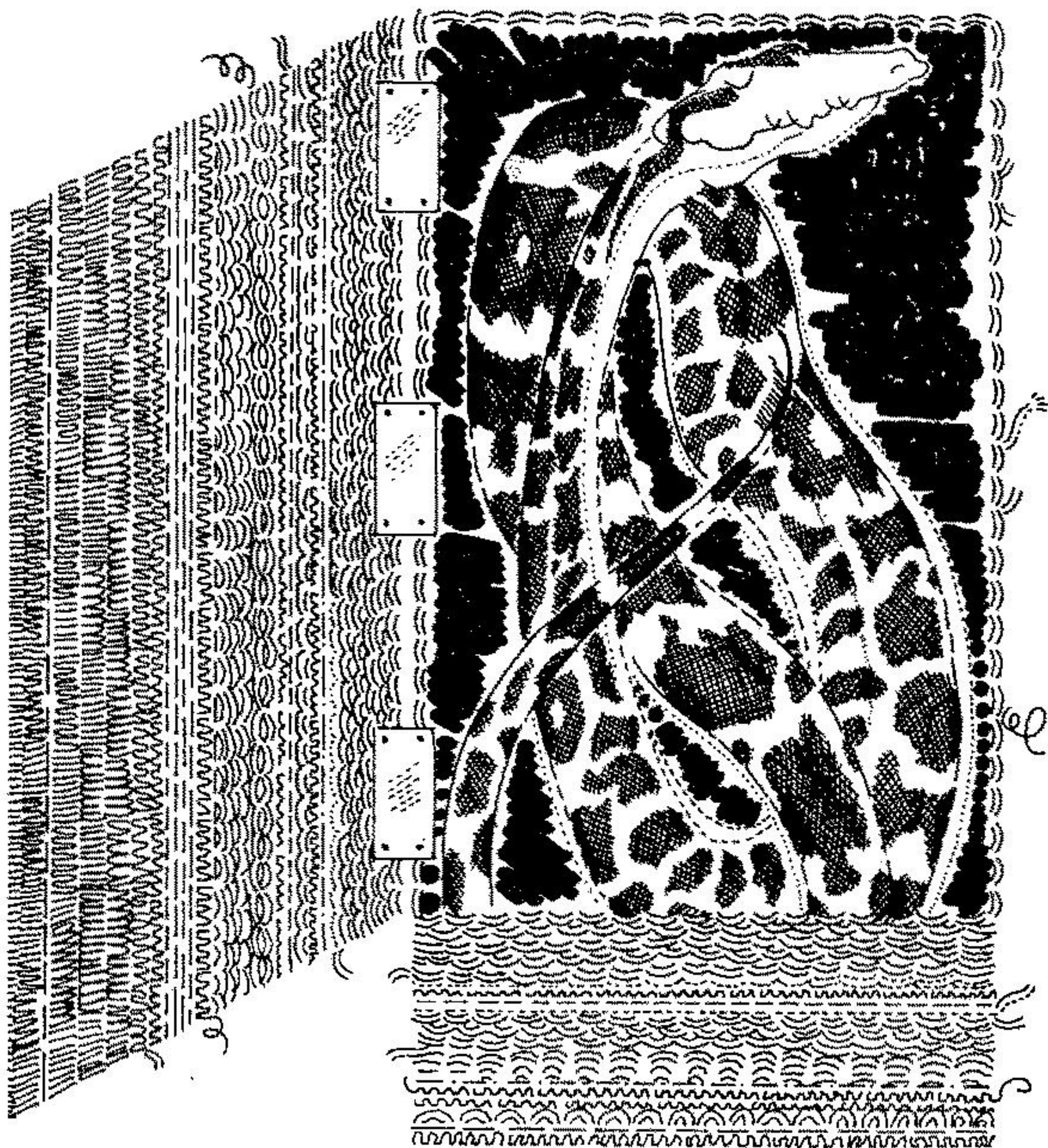
Grandmother dozed off, and even Popeye started nodding, lulled to sleep by the clackety-clack of the wheels and the steady puffing of the steam-engine.

"Well, I'm hungry," I said. "What did Granny make for us?"



"Stuffed parathas, omelettes, and a tandoori chicken. It's all in the hamper under the berth."

I tugged at the cane box and dragged it into the middle of the compartment. The straps were loosely tied. No



sooner had I undone them than the lid flew open, and I let out a gasp of surprise.

In the hamper was our python, curled up contentedly. There was no sign of our dinner.

"It's the python," I said. "And it's finished all our dinner."

"Nonsense," said Grandfather, joining me near the hamper. "Pythons won't eat omelettes and parathas. They like their food alive! Why, this is an old hamper, which was stored in the box-room. The one with our



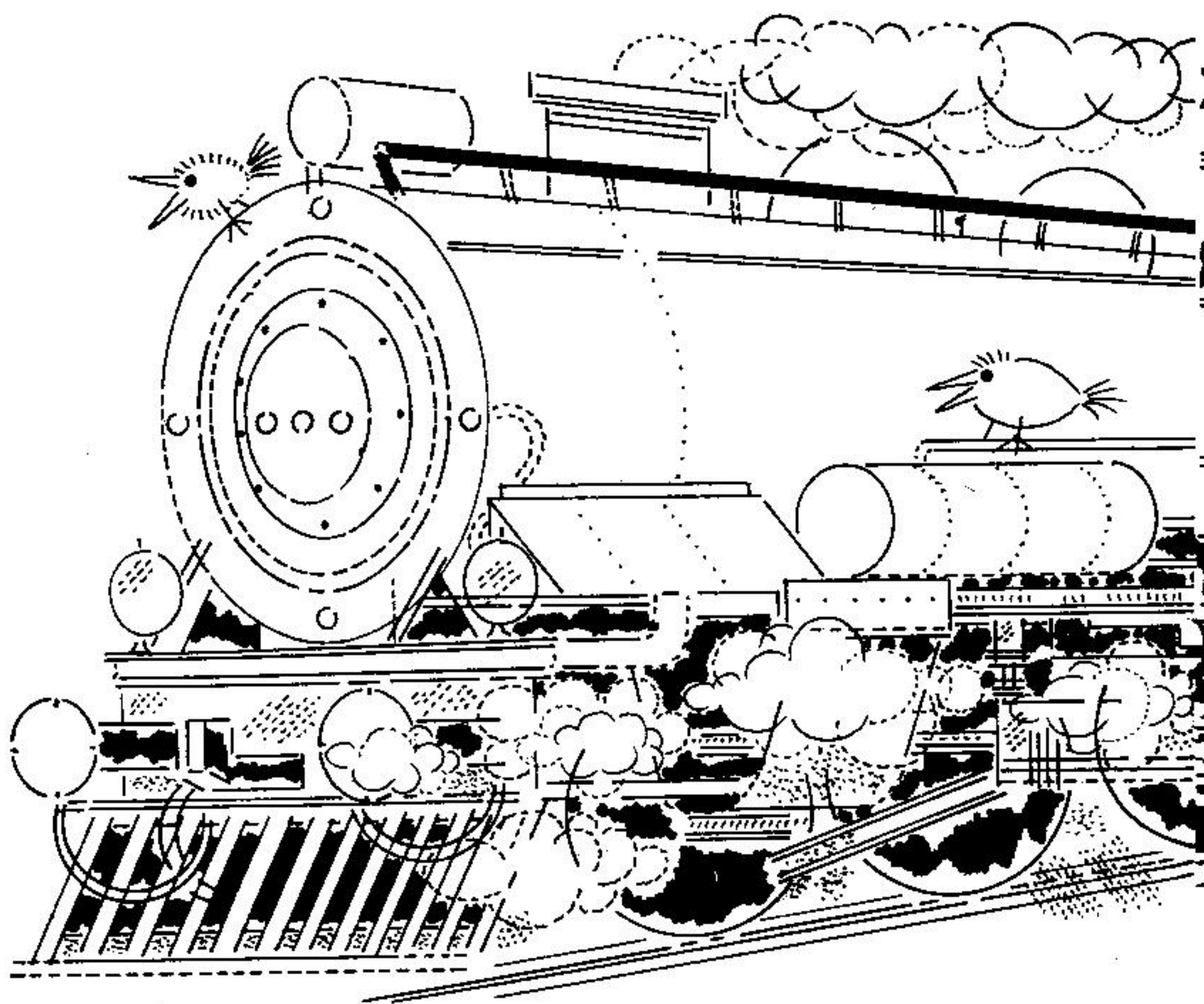
food in it must have been left behind! Wasn't it Major Malik who helped us with our luggage? I think he's got his own back on you!"

Grandfather snapped the hamper shut and pushed it back beneath the berth.

"Don't let Grandmother see him," he said. "She might think we brought him along on purpose."

"Well, I'm hungry," I complained.

"Wait till we get to the next station, then we can buy some pakoras. Meanwhile, try some of Popeye's green chillies."



"No thanks," I said. "You have them, Grandad."

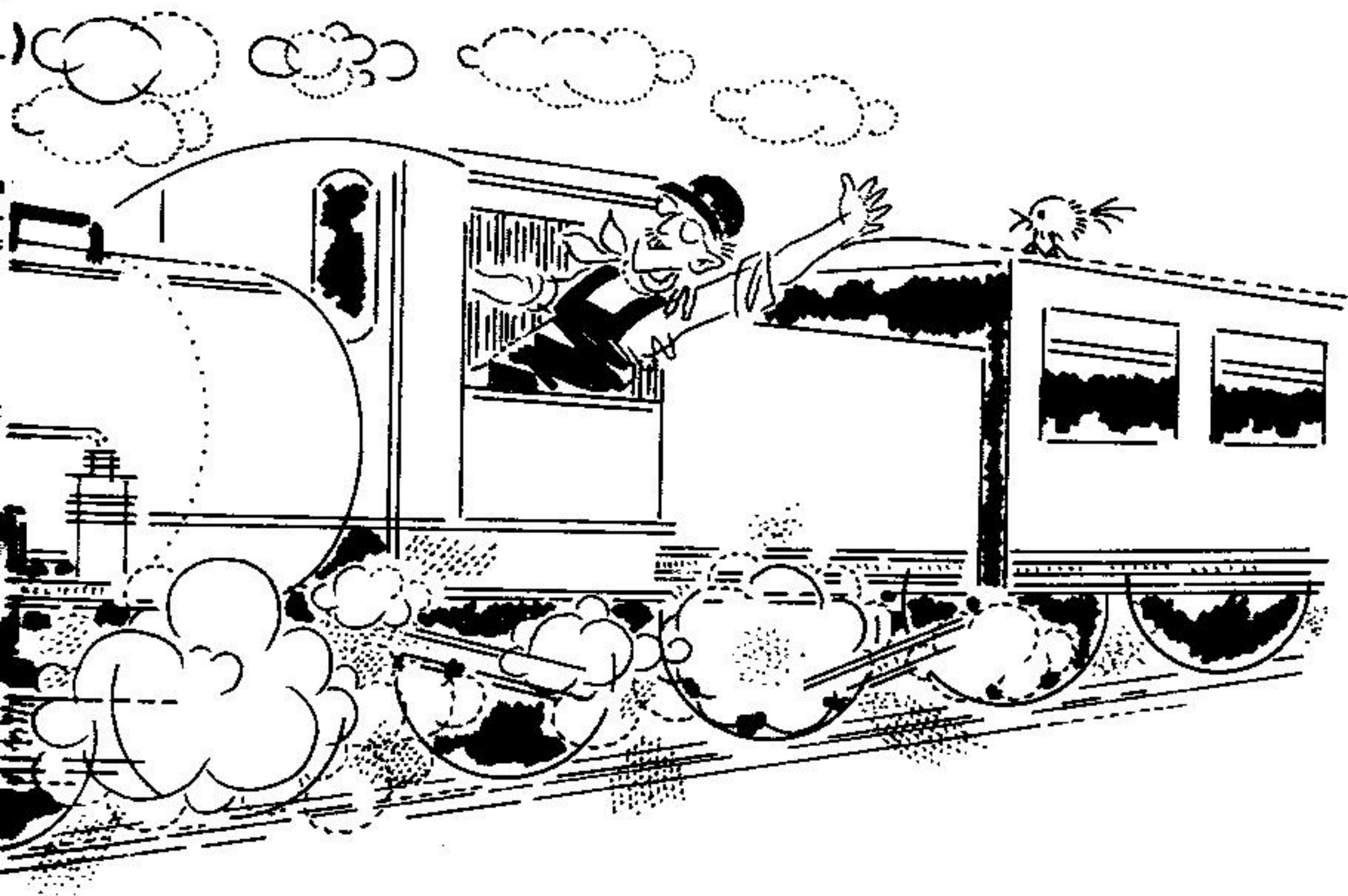
And Grandfather, who could eat chillies plain, popped a couple into his mouth and munched away contentedly.

A little after midnight there was a great clamour at the end of the corridor. Popeye made complaining squawks, and Grandfather and I got up to see what was wrong.

Suddenly there were cries of "Snake, snake!"

I looked under the berth. The hamper was open.

"The python's out," I said, and Grandfather dashed out of the compartment in his pyjamas. I was close behind.





About a dozen passengers were bunched together outside the washroom door.

"Anything wrong?" asked Grandfather casually.

"We can't get into the toilet," said someone.

"There's a huge snake inside."

"Let me take a look," said Grandfather. "I know all about snakes."

The passengers made way and Grandfather and I entered the washroom together, but there was no sign of the python.

"He must have got out through the ventilator," said Grandfather. "By now he'll be in another compartment!" Emerging from the washroom, he told the assembled



passengers, "It's gone! Nothing to worry about. Just a harmless young python."

When we got back to our compartment, Grandmother was sitting up on her berth.

"I knew you'd do something foolish behind my back," she scolded. "You told me you'd left that creature behind, and all the time it was with us on the train."

Grandfather tried to explain that we had nothing to do with it, that the python had smuggled itself into the hamper, or been smuggled into it by Major Malík, but Grandmother was unconvinced.

"Anyway, it's gone," said Grandfather. "It must have fallen out of the washroom window. We're over a



hundred miles from Dehra, so you'll never see it again."

Even as he spoke, the train slowed down and lurched to a grinding halt.

"No station here," said Grandfather, putting his head out of the window.

Someone came rushing along the embankment, waving his arms and shouting.

"I do believe it's the stoker," said Grandfather. "I'd

better go and see what's wrong."

"I'm coming too," I said, and together we hurried along the length of the stationary train until we reached the engine.

"What's up?" called Grandfather. "Anything I can do to help? I know all about engines."

But the engine-driver was speechless. And who could blame him? The python had curled itself about his legs,



and the driver was too petrified to move.

"Just leave it to us," said Grandfather, and dragging the python off the driver, he dumped the snake in my arms. The engine-driver sank down on the floor, pale and trembling.

"I think I'd better drive the engine," said Grandfather, "we don't want to be late getting into Lucknow. Your aunt will be expecting us!" And before the astonished driver could protest, Grandfather had released the brakes and set the engine in motion.

"We've left the stoker behind," I said.

"Never mind. You can shovel the coal."

Only too glad to help Grandfather drive an engine, I dropped the python in the driver's lap, and started shovelling coal. The engine picked up speed and we were soon rushing through the darkness, sparks flying skywards and the steam-whistle shrieking almost without pause.

"You're going too fast!" cried the driver.

"Making up for lost time," said Grandfather. "Why did the stoker run away?"

"He went for the guard. You've left them both behind!"

Early next morning the train steamed safely into Lucknow. Explanations were in order, but as the Lucknow station-master was an old friend of Grandfather's all was well. We had arrived twenty minutes early, and while Grandfather went off to have a cup of tea with the engine-driver and the station-master, I returned the python to the hamper and helped Grandmother with

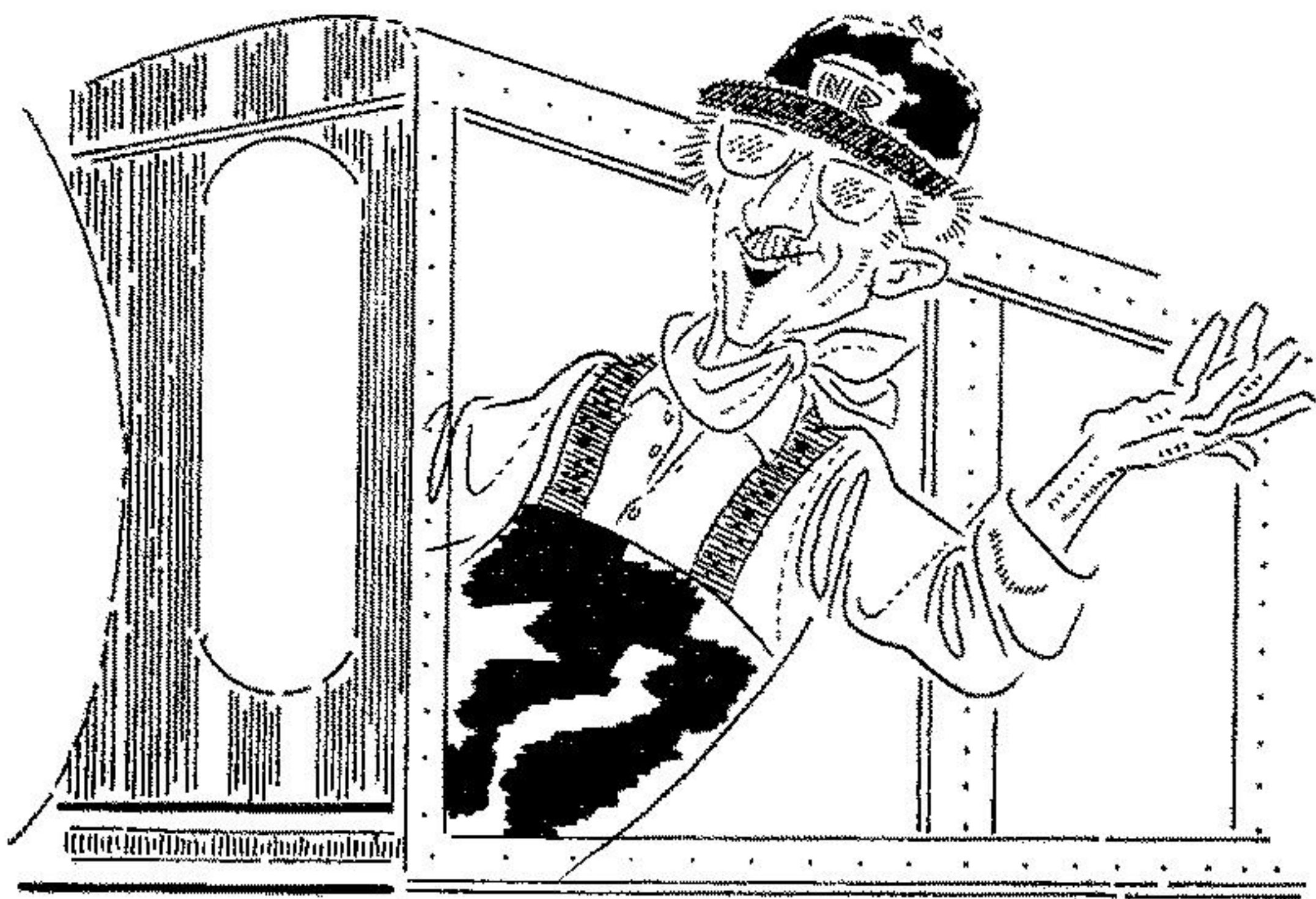
the luggage. Popeye stayed perched on Grandmother's shoulder, eyeing the busy platform with deep distrust. He was the first to see Aunt Ruby striding down the platform, and let out a warning whistle.

Aunt Ruby, a lover of good food, immediately spotted the picnic hamper, picked it up and said, "It's quite heavy. You must have kept something for me! I'll carry it out to the taxi."

"We hardly ate anything," I said.

"It seems ages since I tasted something cooked by your Granny." And after that there was no getting the hamper away from Aunt Ruby.

Glancing at it, I thought I saw the lid bulging, but I had



tied it down quite firmly this time and there was little likelihood of its suddenly bursting open.

Grandfather joined us outside the station and we were soon settled inside the taxi. Aunt Ruby gave instructions to the driver and we shot off in a cloud of dust.

"I'm dying to see what's in the hamper," said Aunt Ruby. "Can't I take just a little peek?"

"Not now," said Grandfather, "first let's enjoy the breakfast you've got waiting for us."

Popeye, perched proudly on Grandmother's shoulder, kept one suspicious eye on the quivering hamper.

When we got to Aunt Ruby's house, we found breakfast laid out on the dining-table.

"It isn't much," said Aunt Ruby. "But we'll supplement it with what you've brought in the hamper."

Placing the hamper on the table, she lifted the lid and peered inside. . . . and promptly fainted.

Grandfather picked up the python, took it into the garden, and draped it over a branch of a pomegranate tree.

When Aunt Ruby recovered, she insisted that she had seen a huge snake in the picnic hamper. We showed her the empty basket.

"You're seeing things," said Grandfather. "You've been working too hard."

"Teaching is a taxing profession," I said solemnly.

Grandmother said nothing. But Popeye broke into loud squawks and whistles, and soon everyone, including a slightly hysterical Aunt Ruby, was doubled up with laughter.





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